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Business

Posted on Fri, Jan. 24, 2003

Growing a warm, fuzzy feeling

Group hopes to create a new market for Ky. wool

By Mary Meehan
HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

Tucked amid the hills of Bourbon County, Landmark Farm looks much like any well-tended rural homestead.

Until, that is, you see the llamas grazing in the field and notice that the black tobacco barn is stripped with new wood.

Inside the barn is something even more unusual: a handful of gleaming machines and gadgets that are essentially a wool processing plant.

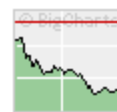
With \$46,385 in state tobacco settlement money coupled with \$5,000 from Bourbon County and \$3,000 from Jessamine County, a group of craftspeople hopes to create a new market for wool products by bringing wool processing closer to home and promoting wool crafts. Previously, according to Lanette Freitag, who is spearheading the efforts of a group called the Kentucky Wool Society, wool had to be shipped out of state to be processed.

Some of the society's members raise their own animals for wool, said Freitag, who has eight llamas and eight sheep. Others buy wool from local farmers.

After 18 months of working to secure funding, Freitag and the other society members began transforming the tobacco barn in August.

Roughly half of the state's \$3.45 billion in tobacco settlement money has been earmarked to promote agricultural development and diversification, said John-Mark Hack, executive director of the governor's office of agricultural policy.

"This is the first year this barn hasn't been used for tobacco," Freitag

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said, unlocking the door of the 100-year-old building to reveal a modern room full of equipment designed to refine untreated wool.

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The country quiet is disturbed by the industrial rumble of the machines as Freitag demonstrates the process, moving from the washing machine where the wool is cleansed of its natural lanolin to a machine that loosens the threads and finally to an elaborate set of rollers and gears that turns wool into smooth batting.

Off to the side is what Freitag considers the group's niftiest gadget.

"This is really cool," said Freitag, bending to watch hundreds of needles transform batting into a thick felt. "This is the only one like it in the United States." This sleek piece of equipment, bearing the serial number "01," is called a needle felting machine and was designed especially for the Kentucky Wool Society.

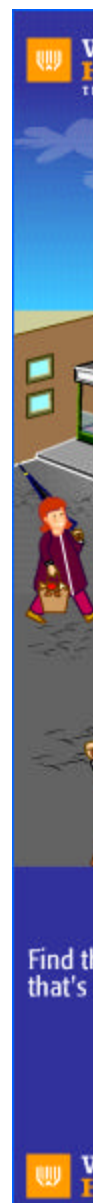
Janice Hensley, who spins wool and creates shawls and scarves, said she's certain the project will take off.

"This is happening all over the country really," Hensley said. "There are small co-ops making all kinds of things. It is working elsewhere, and it is working well."

Eventually, part of the barn will become a retail store, and Freitag hopes to offer classes to help people learn how to make a variety of crafts with wool.

"I really think wool should be more of a crafts supply," Freitag said. "We are hoping to convince people that it can be a crafts supply."

Contact Mary Meehan at 231-3261 or mmeehan@herald-leader.com. News researcher Linda Niemi contributed to this report.

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